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ABSTRACT

Learning communities, freshman interest groups, or cluster classes are a relatively new trend on college and university campuses. In addition to improving freshman retention and performance, these courses create a bridge between the basic course and other courses. Learning communities are curricular structures that promote academic success by emphasizing student-student and student-faculty interaction and interdisciplinary linkage of courses. Themes around which the courses are structured are broad concepts usually selected by the participating faculty of the linked courses. Some learning communities have implemented peer advisors and incorporated some kind of social activity combined with learning. Some have a seminar for the students involved in the community. Promoting a basic course as an important component in the learning communities especially when team teaching is utilized is also a way of breaking the isolation experienced by many faculty members. Learning communities have the potential to decrease communication apprehension. They also make the transition to college less scary for many students by giving them peer advisors. Learning communities have been very effective nationwide in improving retention. (Contains 17 references.) (CR)

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LEARNING COMMUNITIES: LINKING THE BASIC COURSE TO THE GREATER UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

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Learning communities, freshman interest groups, or cluster classes are a relatively new trend on college and university campuses. They are designed to create campus learning communities which give students a sense of "belonging" within the academic environment. For increasing numbers of students, school is sandwiched between work and family and students only come in contact with one another in class rather than in the dorm, library, or at coffee shops. As the number of full-time and traditional students declines across the nation, the sense of community that students receive at college is no longer a given. Because of these changing demographics, Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990) argue in their book on learning communities that "in this environment, the curriculum must now assume responsibilities for building community formerly assumed by the college as a whole" (p. 10).

In addition to improving freshman retention and performance, these courses create a bridge between the basic course and other courses. This addresses a concern that Wartella (1994) expressed when she argued that we must reach out beyond the boundaries of our own academic departments and that "Communication departments and their faculty are often insulated on campuses, disconnected from the common core courses and common undergraduate offerings" (p. 61).

This paper argues that learning communities are a good way for departments to make connections outside of their fields and looks at current research on learning communities. To better understand these issues, this paper will (1) define and discuss what comprises a learning community; (2) discuss the benefits to faculty and the discipline; (3) show the link to the basic course; and (4) discuss general benefits of learning communities.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Learning communities have been around in theory since the 1920s and were even implemented at the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin in 1927, but they have gained greater acceptance and implementation in the last few years (Meikeljohn, 1932). Though they go by different names at various institutions, and have somewhat different components, the common idea is to have from two to four courses linked so that the courses have the same students in all classes. Tinto and Goodsell Love (1995) explain that the underlying principle of learning communities is that "groups of students, taking two or more classes together, will provide both social and academic support for each other and in doing so, enhance the classroom experience for all" (p. 15). These groupings of courses have been called learning communities, freshman interest groups, coordinated studies programs, federated learning communities, triads, integrated studies, linked writing courses, and cluster or tandem classes. Levine and Tompkins (1996) have worked with learning communities at Temple University and define them as "curricular structures that promote academic success by emphasizing student-student and student-faculty interaction and interdisciplinary linkage of courses" (p. 3). Not only do these groupings promote greater interaction, they often try to increase the coherence of what the students are learning. Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews and Smith (1990) explain that learning communities "purposefully restructure the curriculum to link together courses or course work so that students find greater coherence in what they are learning as well as increased intellectual interaction with faculty and fellow students" (p. 5).

Other common elements of learning communities are that they are usually directed at

entering freshman students and they usually involve fairly small class sizes. Where course content or lecture format calls for large class sizes, classes usually have learning community lab sections so that the same students are in a couple smaller classes together and then a lab section of a large lecture class.

There have been several innovations to this basic formula. In response to Schroeder's (1994) contention that residence halls should be utilized to reinforce and enhance classroom learning, several institutions have combined learning communities with residence halls. The University of Missouri at Columbia's Freshman Interest Group (FIG) program is an extension and refinement of programs that began at the University of Oregon and the University of Washington. Unlike those programs, this one has the students in the FIG all live together on the same floor in the residence hall. In their review of the research on residence halls, Pascarella, Terenzini, and Blimling (1994) found that students in residence hall environments that were structured as learning communities had significantly higher levels of involvement in educational activities and interaction with faculty and peers. They also found that this involvement led to higher levels of educational achievement and persistence.

Another innovation in learning communities, is the use of themes around which to structure the courses. These themes are broad concepts usually selected by the participating faculty of the linked courses. The faculty members then have something to connect the various courses throughout the semester. At the small Midwestern college where I teach at the faculty get together the semester before to plan the theme and integrate course syllabi. Themes I have taught have been "Identity in the 90's" which linked the basic course, college writing and research, and introduction to psychology and "Outlooks and Insights" which clusters the basic course with

college writing and rhetoric and concepts of physical activity. How clearly the themes are applied in the learning communities usually depends on how closely the faculty members work together throughout the semester. There are often varying degrees of collaboration even within a single institution.

Some learning communities have implemented peer advisors. This is a junior or senior who might have a major related to the theme of the learning community or someone who sits through one of the courses and acts as a tutor for the students.

Another activity some learning communities incorporate, is some kind of social activity combined with learning. This could include a field trip to a museum, a trip to see a speaker, or a movie and discussion period that takes place outside of the classroom. If the learning community has a theme, the activity usually ties in with the theme. The intent of these activities is to help the students build a sense of community early in the semester and to see their professors together outside of the classroom.

One other component that some learning communities have, is some sort of seminar for the students involved in the community. This seminar usually meets about one hour a week and it gives the students, particularly since they are freshman, an opportunity to discuss good study habits, studying, and any other problems or questions that they might have about college life. This seminar can be taught by all the faculty members in the linked courses or by and outside person.

BENEFITS TO FACULTY AND THE DISCIPLINE

In Wartella's (1994) "Challenge to the Profession," she argues that communication faculty are often insulated on college campuses and that this insulation can be very dangerous in times where communication programs are getting cut from campuses across the nation. She explains that "only if we can situate communication study within a broad definition of undergraduate education will we survive on campuses eager to shed themselves of programs deemed not central to the core mission of academic study" (p. 61). To prevent this from happening, departments need to be active in defining their futures rather than letting them be defined from outside forces.

This isolation is not inherent to communication departments, but is actually built into the structure of the university system. Clifford Gertz (1983) talks about "extremely peculiar career pattern that marks the academic disciplines: namely, that one starts at the center of things and then moves towards the edges" (p. 158). Gertz calls this the "exile from Eden syndrome" and he believes it contributes to the current dilemma and disenchantment with academic life. Graduate education offers a disciplinary richness and network that is often lost once students move on in their career path. Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews and Smith (1990) point out that faculty can experience a sense of intellectual isolation at their home institution if they do not step out of their own disciplinary boundary. They claim that:

> The lack of local opportunities for community building, professional development, and experimentation may increase the sense of disengagement on the part of the faculty. The infinite variety of colleges and universities further increases the lack of communication and dissipates any sense of shared goals among institutions. Ironically, both within and among colleges, faculty lack opportunities to learn from one another at precisely the moment when increasing communication among diverse faculty has become a necessity. (p. 7)

Colleges and universities are organized along department lines and most communication is directed along department lines rather than across disciplines. This can lead to a lack of innovation or integration between disciplines. Grubb and Kraskouskas (1992) explain that it is the disciplinary specialization which is a principle barrier to integration. "Many instructors are wedded to their own disciplines, and some are uninterested and unprepared to make links to related fields. Innovators often report their colleagues unwilling to consider novel approaches"(p. 36).

One way of breaking this isolation across disciplines and letting others across campus know more about what we do in the basic course is to promote the basic course as an important component in learning communities. Several programs that have learning communities currently incorporate the basic course in at least some of the clusters of classes. Working with learning communities further situates the basic course toward new directions for the future and also allows faculty in communication departments the ability to interact with other faculty across several disciplines. The integration of classes strongly encourages collaboration which helps with the isolation that some instructors feel in the teaching environment. Grubb and Kraskouskas (1992) interviewed several instructors who were teaching at community colleges. They found that the instructors welcomed the contact that the learning communities fostered

> They have to co-plan the program. Assignments are structured so that they build upon one another. The content has been developed to correspond with other work being done. That builds a synergy effect. We get more accomplished and make better progress. The instructors love it. It pulls them It has brought instructors together in a new way. away from the isolation they've experienced. They didn't all like it going into the planning, but all have ended up being real fans of the program. (p. 44)

The faculty of LaGuardia Community College have been involved with learning communities and

they have set up regular meetings that include discussions of assessment and teaching and learning methods. In their experience with learning communities, they found that "integration can help bridge the distinct islands of activity within the community college, providing a way of moving toward a true community of learners" (Grubb & Kraskouskas, 1992, p. v).

As a new faculty member, it was very difficult for me to meet people outside my department. There were very few structured gatherings or interactions across disciplines. My involvement in a learning community gave me the opportunity to meet and interact with two other faculty members from different departments per semester. Additionally, the college would have meetings with all the faculty involved in learning communities to discuss how they were working and address possible problems.

Faculty have found rewards from being involved with learning communities especially when team teaching is utilized. This gives faculty a chance to see other faculty members at work and the chance to critique their own teaching. One faculty member at Seattle Central Community College explained how the process had affected him.

> Meeting other faculty in a context of discussing teaching is exhilarating. I'm more enthused about teaching than I've been in years and it's all about rediscovering myself as a learner. Without knowing it, I'd divorced myself from expanding in my field and in my teaching . All the interesting parts of my life were outside the college. I was putting in time so I could be elsewhere. I've learned again something that I knew long ago as an undergraduate: I enjoy learning for its own sake. It makes you feel good and alive. Working with other faculty has been the key to this awakening. (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, Smith, 1990, p. 82)

Some faculty have been resistant to working with learning communities because of the increased time and collaboration efforts that are required. For example, at LaGuardia Community College, some faculty were initially resistant, but ended up supporting the program. Several still

contended, however, that they never had sufficient time for joint planning.

In looking at other schools that have implemented learning communities, Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990) found that faculty members in English were particularly attracted to learning communities because of their stress on active learning methods and cross-curricular thinking and writing. The types of faculty who teach in learning communities is varied, but in Washington state, the learning communities draw heavily from mid-career faculty members because they feel more ready to take new challenges and risks. An interesting finding that emerged from the research on learning communities was that women faculty were very involved in the learning community effort on almost every campus (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990). This might be because learning communities have features that are consistent with what feminist literature suggests as important such as cooperation and shared power, and a personal connection to the material being studied.

Not only do faculty members benefit from the interaction with other disciplines, the students and faculty benefit from the increased coherence of their learning program. Tichenor and Kakareka (1995) point out that "an integrated curriculum can demonstrate the interrelationships between diverse disciplines" (p. 44). Since the faculty work together, they can presuppose knowledge and abilities gained in other classes and they can therefore reinforce the other classes with additional examples or applications. In many of the learning communities, the students could ask questions about topics, even if they were not in the "right" class. As one student said, "We try to relate whatever we learn from one class to the other class; professors are trying to relate them to all three subjects: reading, writing, oral communication" (Tinto & Goodsell, 1995, p. 89). This is particularly easy to see when themes are involved because they provide faculty with a

common thread with which to link their individual courses. Tinto and Goodsell (1995) found that "students could see connections in topics across classes, especially in those learning communities where faculty planned carefully to overlap topics, assignments, and readings" (p. 91).

THE BASIC COURSE

One direct benefit for the basic course from learning communities may be the decrease of communication apprehension (CA). Communication apprehension has continued to be a problem with the basic course. The existence of high CA levels in college students has been widely documented (McCroskey, 1970; Bowers, 1986). Additionally, recent studies have demonstrated a positive correlation with high levels of CA and at-risk-students (McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, & Payne, 1989; Chesebro et al., 1992; Rosenfeld, Grant, & McCroskey, 1995). High CA students tend to avoid all different forms of communication, such as communication with peers, advisors, and professors, activities which may result in a lowering of apprehension levels.

Learning communities afford the students with opportunities for these differing forms of communication in a continuous and sustained setting over the course of the semester. The peers are not just students in one class, they are students in several classes, and this familiarity may also have an impact on levels of apprehension. In general, one of the major reasons students liked learning communities was the chance to form a community with other students. With the changing student population and a decreasing traditional students, there are less opportunities for students to get to know groups of other students. One student reflected on the difference

between being in discrete classes in the spring as opposed to the social and academic support she had received in the fall in a liberal arts cluster.

> In the cluster we knew each other, we were friends, we discussed everything from all the classes. We knew things very, very well because we discussed it all so much. We had a discussion about everything. Now it's more difficult because there are different people in each class. There's not so much - oh, I don't know how to say it. It's not so much togetherness. In the cluster if we needed help or if we had questions, we could help each other. . . . Now we're just more on our own. (Tinto & Goodsell Love, 1995, p. 82)

Learning communities made the college transition less scary for many students by giving them a peer group. "The fact that learning communities provided a known, consistent, group of peers helped students' feelings of anxiety in the classroom" (Tinto & Goodsell Love, 1995, p. 77).

While this is true at the community college level, it is especially true at large colleges or universities where students may feel lost in the shuffle. In large institutions, first year class sizes can run into the hundreds. Students often report that "learning is a highly individualistic, often alienating experience" (Tinto & Goodsell, 1994, p. 23).

While learning communities decrease overall apprehension, they can also decrease speech apprehension which had direct benefits for the basic course. When one student at LaGuardia Community College was asked what difference being in a liberal arts cluster made for him, he replied:

> It has made it easier for me to do my oral presentations for the oral communication course. Because these people know me and I know them, you know what I mean? If it was a different class, it would have been different, cuz you don't know them too well . . . in one class. But this is a cluster and everybody knows each other. I know everybody very well now. So I wasn't nervous at all, so that's how it helps. (Tinto & Goodsell Love, 1995, p. 83)

I had a similar experience in my learning community this semester. One of my students

was talking about her apprehension while giving speeches during the semester as compared to the introduction speeches on first day of class when she didn't know anyone. She stated that: "I wasn't really nervous speaking since I know everyone. I see them at 8:00 and 2:00 today and 11:00 tomorrow. It wasn't like the first day when I didn't know anyone."

Students are not only more comfortable in public speaking situations, but are also more comfortable in interpersonal communication. At Temple University, "Students also revealed that they were more comfortable asking questions, participating in discussions, and seeking out teachers for assistance in learning communities than in non-learning communities courses" (Levine & Tomkins, 1996, p. 2). Knowing the other students made it easier to participate in discussions and in-class writing assignments and also made students feel comfortable disclosing personal information in class (Tinto & Goodsell Love, 1995, p. 83). Students also felt more comfortable asking questions of others in the learning communities. Tinto and Goodsell (1994) found in their study at a large university that what was consistent across all the learning communities, or FIGs for their study, was "that students turned to other members of the FIG at least once during the quarter for purposes of academic support" (p. 20).

These varied experiences show that the basic course can directly benefit from its involvement in learning communities through a decrease in the communication apprehensions that students have during speeches, in their classroom interactions, and in their interpersonal relationships with other students and the professor.

BENEFITS OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Though this paper has focused primarily on the benefits from learning communities to faculty, the discipline, and the basic course, there are several general benefits to students that should also be mentioned in any discussion of learning communities. Learning communities were begun as a way to bridge the transition between high school and college and hopefully improve retention of freshman students. Retention has been a serious problem in higher education for many years. Forty-one of every one hundred students who enroll in college, leave without earning a college degree, and most depart during the first two years of school (Tinto, 1987).

Learning communities have been very effective nationwide at improving retention. Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990) found that nationwide for students in learning communities "beginning to end-of-quarter retention rates averaged ten to twenty percentage points higher than typical institutional averages" (p. 63). Some schools have had much more significant increases. LaGuardia Community College's Learning Clusters have had a nearly 90 percent end-of-quarter retention rate and Western Michigan University cluster students have had 100 percent retention.

At Temple University, the biggest benefit has been that there are fewer withdraws or incompletes and students in learning communities receive higher grades on average than students in non-learning community sections of the same course (Levine & Tompkins, 1996, p. 2). In the study of a large university, Tinto and Goodsell (1994) found that students attendance was better in learning community classes due to the decrease in feelings of anonymity. Students knew their peer group and since the classes were smaller, they felt like they would be missed if they were absent. One student stated that "since you know everyone, they really encourage you not to skip out. There's more encouragement not to miss classes. If you go to your first class, then there's

everyone telling you to go to your second" (Tinto & Goodsell, 1994, p. 19).

Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990) studied learning communities across the nation and identified several concepts that students valued about learning communities. They found that what students gained were friendships and a sense of belonging, appreciation of collaborative learning, appreciation of other students' perspectives, the discovery of texts, the building of intellectual connections, the ability to embrace complexity, and gaining new perspectives on their own learning process.

In the longitudinal study of LaGuardia Community College, Tinto and Goodsell Love (1995) found that overall, students in learning communities "outperformed students in the comparison classes. And this was the case despite their having lower grade point averages in high school" (p. 62). Students in learning communities were also more likely to continue their education, and they had more positive perceptions of other students, faculty, counselors, and the campus climate. These benefits were even more pronounced when students were involved in housing programs that were a part of the learning community.

A benefit mentioned before was the social support that students received through learning communities. "Meeting people was the predominant reason given for joining and liking a FIG" (Tinto & Goodsell, 1994, p. 15). One student who commuted claimed that if it weren't for the FIG, he would not have met anyone at school. This high level of social and academic support contributed to the students' belief that they would succeed in college.

When students at LaGuardia Community College were questioned about learning communities, they indicated that they preferred the learning communities on the whole and some even wished that they could be longer than just the one semester.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that communication departments and the basic course should play an active role in developing and sustaining learning communities. Because of the changing demographics of the student population, the curriculum now needs to help build community, and the basic course would benefit from being part of this community. In addition to their general benefits such as retention, decreased withdrawals, better grades, and more positive perceptions, learning communities allow faculty the opportunity to cross disciplinary lines and collaborate with other faculty members. This gives communication departments a chance to be seen and understood across campus and to play an integral part of learning communities. Learning communities provide a great opportunity to link the basic course to the broader university community. Additionally, learning communities have the potential to decrease communication apprehension which has direct implications for the basic course.

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